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Paysages et héritages de David Bowie

"Come Tomorrow, May I Be Bolder Than Today?": *PinUps*, Striptease, and Social Performance

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"Come Tomorrow, May I Be Bolder Than Today?": *PinUps*, Striptease, and Social Performance

Shannon Finck

1 In the spring of 1973, just before the official "retirement" of Ziggy Stardust that summer, David Bowie asked the public what turned out to be a career-defining question: "Who'll love Aladdin Sane?" ("Aladdin Sane"). Not only did *Aladdin Sane*, Bowie's sixth studio album, usher in the series of bold musical innovations that would launch him into rock-and-roll legendry, the introduction of the Aladdin Sane persona—"a lad insane"—signaled a performative instability that would continue to inspire, frustrate, and titillate fans and critics even after his death. This essay explores opportunities for tarrying with—rather than reducing or trying to pin down—that instability and critiques what seem to be inexhaustible efforts to do just that. Positing Bowie's other 1973 release, *PinUps*, as a deconstructive gloss on his artistic transformations in the 1970s and beyond, I argue for considering the inverse acts of covering songs and revealing skin as parallel strategies for exposing and dismantling controlling narratives of identity, celebrity, and sexuality.

2 The tendency to conflate Bowie with his various stage personae represents just one such impulse to control the narrative of his life and work. Bowie biographers, for instance, sometimes cite a touching origin story for the Aladdin Sane character as a response to his half-brother's (a lad clinically deemed insane) schizophrenia diagnosis, concluding that Bowie's ability to explore multiple personalities and speak in different voices on stage afforded him a means of healing from their shared childhood trauma.[1] Another method for decrypting Bowie's enigma has been to stabilize his fitful image by employing it in a unified campaign against homophobia and heteronormativity—to render him, as Philip Hoare puts it, "a queer messiah" ("The alien among us" 23). This has made it difficult to contend with stylistic evolutions that present Bowie as anything less or different than "the perfect cyborg of queer and trans visibility" (Manduley). We are unlikely ever to arrive at a figure of Bowie that satisfies our demands for legibility or for ready-made consumption by a social movement. Alternatively, we might find in the question—*Who*

[among you] will [continue to] love [a shifting signifier, A/ladd/in Sane]?—a challenge to meet the demand Bowie's work has made of audiences time and time again, station to station. Bowie's death in 2016 means, unfortunately for us, there will be no more such stations, but perhaps "the actor's" final act invites us to reflect on a matter that could only be addressed in retrospective: what a figure like Bowie might mean to long-view cultural histories of identity politics and social performance.

3 Richard Dyer defines the "star" in music, film, and culture as a "structured polysemy," in which a "multiplicity of meanings and affects" are organized so that "some meanings and affects are foregrounded and others are masked or displaced" in order to present a consistent, consumable image (*Stars* 3). Bowie, in contrast, proclaimed himself star*dust*, fragmentary and fleeting, almost from the beginning. As his music evolved dramatically from one album to the next—and his appearance along with it—the listening public was posed a clear ultimatum at each new turn: "keep your 'lectric eye on me, babe," or don't ("Moonage Daydream"). Bowie, growing up from Ziggy, seems to know before we do that "We'll love Aladdin Sane ;" one minute and forty-nine seconds into the album's title track, he answers his own question ("Aladdin Sane"). And we do love him, but we didn't always, as we didn't love the characters that came after him—the Thin White Duke, Pierrot, The Outsider, and so on. The sum success of Bowie's career has made it difficult to remember how his transformations of character and style once (and again and again) seemed to audiences more insane than brilliant. The hagiography surrounding his death has only affirmed this perception.[2] From a music criticism standpoint, I see this as a positive development, as many of the negative responses to Bowie's albums and performances over the years (as we will see here) involve the unexamined personal biases of the critics themselves, and their marginalization in the record makes sense. From a cultural studies perspective, however, recovering those accounts—the curmudgeon chronicles and the premature postmortems—provides a unique opportunity to confront subjective essentialisms in our attachments to pop culture icons.

4 A broad look at the reception history reveals how Bowie's characterological instability incites a form of image-policing motivated beyond brand recognition or media marketability. Take for instance, Martin Amis's caustic review of Bowie's concert at the Hammersmith Odeon Theatre in London—the one where, much to everyone's dismay, Bowie bids farewell to Ziggy Stardust. Amis writes:

> When Glam-Rock superstar David Bowie flounced on to the...stage last Monday night, recognisably male and not even partially naked, it seemed that we would be denied the phenomenon-of-our-times spectacle which your reporter was banking on. ...[T]hat musician went through various stages of déshabillé—now in orange rompers, now a miniskirt, now in hot-pants, now a leotard—but we never got to see the famous silver catsuit and pink jockstrap. Bowie did, it's true, have a habit of turning away from the audience and sulkily twitching his backside at it before floating off to arouse each aisle in turn with his silky gaze—but there was no sign of the celebrated sodomistic routine involving lead guitarist Mick Ronson, no acts of stylised masturbation and fellatio with microphone and mikestand. Perhaps Mr Bowie just wasn't feeling up to it that evening, or perhaps Mr Bowie was just a mild fad hystericised by 'the media', an entrepreneur of camp who knew how little, as well as how much, he could get away with. ("Mild Fad")

5 Amis makes no mention of the music Bowie and his band performed that evening; instead, he focuses his vitriol on Bowie's "dinky weapon of a torso"—the "modish violence" and the "vague, predatory, escapist" notions embodied therein ("Mild Fad").

Disappointed by Bowie, Amis attempts to warn readers that he is somehow both trivial and dangerous. Amis's review is merely one of dozens like it, in which the reviewers' confusion reveals more about their own needs and expectations for Bowie than the experience of Bowie's performances. But even Hoare, whose writing celebrates Bowie as "a conduit for a lost generation," concedes, "The problem with writing about Bowie is that we are all writing about ourselves" (23). I thus suggest we turn our electric eyes inward, using Bowie as a lens.

6 Throughout this essay, I examine the archive of British and American criticism for Bowie's 1970s albums, tracing his transition from Space Oddity to Plastic Soul in order to analyze emergent patterns of resistance to his self-reinvention. I propose that doing so gives us a means, not of understanding Bowie any better, but of scrutinizing demands for authenticity in cultural and artistic production and exposing the fault in our ways of assessing the authenticity of a given performance.[3] In particular, an overreliance on stability and consistency as barometers of sincerity can lead to the misrecognition of performances with genuine potential to destabilize cultural norms. As Bethany Usher and Stephanie Fremaux point out—particularly with respect to the 1990s work, largely ignored by music media, in which Bowie sought recognition as an "authentic member of the current age" and a producer of "culturally resonant" material—responses to Bowie's changes in artistic direction over the years can be characterized by a pervasive "unwillingness to allow Bowie to escape the characters he created" (394). I am interested in cultivating a better understanding of this inflexibility, by which we disempower the very cultural icons that empower our performances and thus turn away from the affirmation of subjective play that Derrida establishes as the practical objective of poststructuralism ("Structure, Sign, and Play" 292). Historicizing responses to David Bowie's permutations of character positions a familiar narrative within popular culture as a vehicle though which to examine both the deconstructive possibilities of performative subjectivity and their antithesis, the biopolitical management of bodies and their signifying acts through identity politics.

7 Because Ziggy Stardust—arguably more so than David Bowie—became such an important ambassador of queer culture in the seventies, the process of dismantling the avatar carried with it the threat of undoing the image of queer experience for which Ziggy stood. This image was not only precious to fans; it was a politically useful demonstration of life beyond the binary. While Bowie-as-Ziggy made queer signification seem powerful, desirable, and more broadly appealing than ever before, Bowie's desire to shed Ziggy like a costume felt like a betrayal to fans who could not—and would not—simply step out of their own queer identities.[4] And it made his cultural contributions suddenly easy to dismiss for notable masculinist detractors like Amis. Moreover, because of a combination of Ziggy's edgy libidinal excess and his "newborn" vulnerability, Bowie's public act of divesting himself of Ziggy carried with it the dangerous undertones of homophobic violence. One fan, recalling the frantic atmosphere surrounding Bowie's final days as Ziggy describes Bowie as having "killed" Ziggy "off" right before her eyes (Vermorel 182).
[5] There are a number of legitimate reasons for the tenacity of fan investment in the figure of Ziggy Stardust, but Bowie himself, in several public appearances, confessed to feeling trapped in a glittering closet of his own conception. "I feel like Dr. Frankenstein," he admits to one interviewer; "What have I created" (Hollingworth)? Bowie's predicament would seem like one with which fans who saw him as a queer icon could empathize, but by policing Bowie's nonconformity, they remain nevertheless complicit with mass media

and the music and fashion industries in a career-long project of "image imprisonment" from which Bowie struggled through the decades to liberate himself (Lindridge 561). In a 2002 interview for *Mojo*, Bowie reflects on his fraught relationship to the character that made him famous: "It became apparent to me that...it was just so much easier for me to be Ziggy" (Du Noyer). The "epistemology of the closet," as Bowie describes it, reveals how perilously easy it is to harbor a minoritizing view of nonnormative sexuality within an outwardly positive one when the cultural and political climate is such that one is called to defend nonconforming practices, preferences, and lifestyles.[6]

8 Connecting these notions of closet and costume to another dissociative performance, the act of "covering" another artist's work, I turn to the 1973 release of *PinUps*, a collection of cover songs bridging major transitional albums, *Aladdin Sane* and *Diamond Dogs*. I read this album as a kind of pilot for Bowie's becoming, an exploratory project allowing him to perform different characters, all unified under a coherent album concept. *PinUps* has been trivialized in Bowie's *oeuvre*, but I argue here for both its significance and its liberatory politics using the logic of striptease theorized by Roland Barthes, whose *Mythologies* appeared in English translation in the seventies as well. Employing Barthes' definition of the striptease as a mystifying, contradictory, and subtly antagonistic spectacle helps us to contextualize public perceptions of Bowie's more radical transformations within anxieties surrounding identity and authenticity in the culture at large. It is my contention that in *PinUps*, we see Bowie uncovering via the polyvocality of the cover album a more profound set of claims about identity than that of which Ziggy alone was capable.

"Shapes of Things": Bowie and the Poststructuralist/ materialist split

9 In addition to Barthes, the problem of resistance to new and different iterations of Bowie finds resonances in current theory addressing political ontology, relativism, and the limits of our present form of identity politics. In our lives as much as in art, our most compelling performances often risk either objectifying or hypostatizing identity claims precisely because they are so compelling. But being, as we know, exceeds the symbolic level at which such performances take place and can be most productively theorized as what Elizabeth Grosz, for instance, calls a "continuum of raw materials" available for organization into coherent performances of the self (34). Are strong reactions to Bowie's changeling performances, then, responses to being forced to encounter that continuum as he draws repeatedly from it? Or, are they byproducts of a longstanding political discourse that understands habitual, repetitive performances of identity and social roles as means through which subjects gain ontological security?[7] Judith Butler's work on gender reminds us that identity is a sequence of outwardly performative acts that, together, cultivate a recognizable "corporeal style ;" those whose performances eschew or subvert this recognition face social exclusion or worse (*Gender Trouble* 139-40). According to Butler, identity is always already a copy; a repetition, a copy of a copy, will lead to recognition, while a deviation will expose identity as a social construction. If this exposure is unwelcome, it opens the subject up to the threat of physical harm or severe censorship.

10 Perhaps these reactions are rooted in what Christopher Breu and others identify as a "deadlock" in contemporary theory between poststructuralist and Marxist-materialist discourses—a deadlock that cannot be resolved via identity politics but from which our current understanding of identity politics comes and by which it is, to some degree, maintained (187). Breu describes this impasse in optimistic terms, as an ethical obligation to credit the insights of each critical tradition; he insists, "It is crucial to maintain the poststructuralist critique of the discourses of nature and the biological...yet it is equally essential to recognize the ways in which various forms of materiality—from the geopolitical and socioeconomic to the biological—place limits on the discursive construction of everyday life" (187-88). Unfortunately, this theoretical stalemate has been around for a while and, despite strong efforts from William Connolly and others, the discourse shows no sign of moving toward easy resolution.[8] Writing more than a decade before Breu, Jeffrey T. Nealon observes that though "the success of a poststructuralist-multiculturalist identity politics lies in its recognizing the structuring space of otherness" and though "this recognition has in turn shown the way for further concrete deployments of toleration and respect," those deployments are slow to manifest in material terms (4). For Nealon, disharmony persists in our sociopolitical relations because the acknowledgment of a common intersubjective ground is not enough to liberate us from systems of signification bound up in alterity and deficiency. To clarify, Nealon argues that "[t]he intersubjective community is a community of lack in which each person or group is compelled to give up the hopeless project of totalization for the attainable mini-totality of social recognition," which is, of course, influenced by capital (5). The consequences of this social stratification include the development of a staunch "expropriative" politics of resentment or exclusion; "For all its gains," he writes, "identity politics...continues to thematize differences among persons, groups, and discourses in terms of (the impossibility of their) sameness" (6). Breu and Nealon offer like solutions to their similar quandaries over the limits of identity politics. Breu envisions a "leftist ontology" that would develop out of theories of materiality that "help us rethink the relationship" of symbolic performance to "bodies and to the workings of the political economy in our present moment" (189). In other words, it would revise our accounts of ontology to "attend to the centrality of both materiality and desire to the constitution of the social" (193). Nealon advocates a consciousness around performative subjectivity that takes into account "the ethical component" of *affirmation* as a response to alterity. In other words, our performative responses, as much as performances themselves, establish an ethics and praxis of performativity around the "material affirmation of difference" (169-172).

11 Responses to Bowie over the years have ranged from the hastily dismissive to the intensely personal, even identificatory, but even the latter of these extremes should not be considered straightforwardly affirmative. In one particularly purple example, Randy Blazek explains

> For those of us who came of age in the 1970s, Bowie was...an avatar of our awkward young selves as gangly beings who had just fallen to earth, genderless, omnisexual... When Ziggy Stardust arrived, I could see clues to a third path, somewhere between male and female ....His self-declared bisexuality created a safe zone for us as we engaged in our own space exploration." (5)

12 Blazek's impressions of Bowie repeat some common refrains in the language of longtime fans as their sentiments grow increasingly nostalgic: many credit Bowie's contributions

to their individual processes of identity formation, and they all refer to Ziggy Stardust and David Bowie interchangeably.[9] But nostalgia is not the only reason people's youthful memories of their experience of Bowie sound alike. Andrew Lindridge and Tony Eager associate this homogeneity of affect with Bowie's "human brand," a marketing construct wherein a celebrity's performance is tailor-made to resonate with certain ideas and/or promote a specific set of values (548). In Bowie's case, this branding strategy emphasized "ideological narratives around sexual (mis)adventure...and resistance to 'normative behaviour'" as well as "critically question[ing] sanity, identity and...what it means to be us," and it originated with the creation of Ziggy Stardust (Cinque 401). As Lindridge and Eager point out, a successful brand has its own agency, a life apart from its owner, which is why Bowie has become, effectively, "an image prisoner" to the Ziggy character (549). Where Bowie's other characters inspired confusion, Ziggy affirmed certain queer ontologies. Fans, however, were effectively prevented by their attachments to Ziggy's affirmation, by our common social conditioning in dialogic recognition, and by capital from returning the favor.

13 Likewise, many of Bowie's 1970s albums—some now considered his best—were commercial successes that did not meet with commensurate critical acclaim, suggesting that while Bowie's star status prompted people to buy his albums, they did not necessarily know what to make of them—or him. One reviewer, writing for *Melody Maker* (former rival to *NME*), calls *Aladdin Sane*, for instance, "superficially stunning and ultimately frustrating" for its failure to encompass the "futuristic" motifs listeners had come to expect from their star man (A.L.). The reviewer goes on to critique not only the album, but Bowie's performance promoting it on a popular British talk show: "While he was singing he was perfect: the whole scintillating bisexual image, guaranteed to throw the entire population of straight Britain into panic. And musically, he and the band were machine-tooled perfection. But as soon as he sat down to talk, the whole image dissolved like runny mascara. What he had to say was in no way futuristic, or profound, or controversial" (A.L.). These observations prompt the reviewer to wonder whether or not we can believe Bowie is "saying anything at all" if we are unable to determine "how deep" his on-stage personalities go (A.L.). A close look at a number of contemporary reviews of Bowie's transitional albums reveals their common shape—a formula: one part dogged assurance that his previous work was better; one part disparagement of Bowie speaking or singing without the mask of Ziggy or doing anything inconsistent with the Ziggy persona; and one part arduous pursuit of the authentic, deep-down identic truth of Bowie, a crack in the actor.

14 This pattern of response tells us something about the way we relate to one another, too. For instance—and this applies to Bowie as well—consider how commonplace it is for identity claims to be framed as revelation, or "coming out," as though a newer claim, by virtue of being newer, is the latent truth of a person's subjectivity, subsuming all others—*he was x all along*. Brandon Taylor describes the provisional affirmations of queer identification thusly:

> This is how cultural selection works when one inhabits a culture within an overculture. The larger culture selects the narratives that are the most readily translated into terms it deems legible. Shame, pain, and an intense desire to assimilate are the most legible aspects of queer life as perceived by the heteronormative overculture. Therefore, the art that it chooses to endorse often slots neatly into those categories. The coming-out story, violence against queer bodies, queer sexuality, the recapitulation of heteronormative

family structures—all of these narratives position queer lives as either a simulacrum or an antithesis of straight lives. ("Who Cares?")

15 But it is, conversely, the malleability of both subject and subjectifying narrative—the subject as a continuum of performances, an endlessly rewritable story—rather than its timelessness or its undeniable essence, that Bowie's performances so fluently articulate and which grounds their political potential.

A "pure and geometrical shape": Bowie as Absolute Object

16 *Aladdin Sane* is the album most commonly associated with David Bowie's "schizophrenic" refusal to commit to a single, discernible identity, for better or worse. Bowie himself had much to say about *feeling* schizophrenic, having doubts about one's sanity, and being of two minds.[10] Nevertheless, he described this new character simply as "Ziggy in America"—not a total departure from the sensational Ziggy Stardust who had inspired the so-called "cult of Bowie," but a Ziggy who had seen things and would never again be the bright-eyed star man fans had grown to love, a Ziggy of contradictions (Buckley 135-6). The first two tracks appear to instruct us to "read" this album in a like manner. While "Watch That Man" signals a more significant transformation on the horizon, "Aladdin Sane" anticipates the public's response to Ziggy gone missing. "Oh honey," Bowie advises, "watch that man/ He walks like a jerk/ But he's only taking care of the room/ Must be in tune" ("Watch That Man"). Watch him do what, though, watch him *for* what? What are we to expect? "Watch him dash away," of course, "swinging [the] old bouquet" of our affections ("Aladdin Sane").

17 When Bowie set out to record *PinUps,* released later in 1973, he intended not only to bring 1960s mod hits to an American audience less familiar with the '64-'67 London music scene, but to "shake off the spectre of Ziggy Stardust" by returning to his roots and trying on other voices (Seabrook 19). Though the album was somewhat successful in the first respect, it proved wildly unsuccessful in the second. Greg Shaw notes in a legendary bad review of *PinUps* that its tracks felt "underproduced" in order to "make way for Bowie's voice" (*Rolling Stone*). By "Bowie's voice," Shaw surely means Ziggy's, as most of Bowie's notable work up to that point had developed the otherworldly mythology of the Ziggy Stardust persona. Figuratively speaking, Bowie's voice is deliberately subjugated to these others—musicians who had influenced him as a youth and to whom he appears to have turned for inspiration once again. Musically, Shaw's criticism of *PinUps* is nonetheless valid, I think, but a parade of less incisive, reactionary press for Bowie's mid-70s albums follows Shaw's. Chris Chesnutt, editor of the *New Haven Rock Press*, for example, writes, "No matter how good David Bowie may really be, the stuff he's doing now is a lot of shit" (qtd. in Tiven).

18 The most inflammatory of these reviews include harsh appraisals of Bowie's character. The following, from another 1973 essay—in which R&B producer and rock journalist, Jon Tiven, consistently refers to Bowie's "namby-pambiness" and uses terms like "castrated" to compare the tracks on *PinUps* to their originals—has this to contribute to the unease accumulating around Bowie's elusive identifications:

> Well, what kind of half-man heavy metal rocker [do] we have here? ... I did a little research on the lad to find that he was not, by nature, a true homosexual, but not

heterosexual and...not really a true bisexual either. "So what was he, a fucking neuter?" asks the reader, and the answer is NO, because David Bowie is really a total schizophrenic. He not only is a persona schizoid, but a sexual splitsky as well, going through periods of "straightness" and "gayness" like the little butterfly/caterpillar, but in a contiguous chain. "Ah, a lad who really doesn't know where he's at...just what the world needs," I said to myself in earnest. (*The Good Times*)

19 These latter two snippets come from a publication whose bread and butter was provocation, but they point toward a broader critical trend developing around Bowie's unwillingness to fix his image according to his audiences' demands. Homophobia notwithstanding, Tiven's main issues with *PinUps* in particular include "experiments with too many voices" so that he "ends up sounding like a strutting self-mockery" rather than the mouthpiece of all "strangers in a strange land" that people had imagined him to be, and that he "could have made...an amazing record if he had...kicked out the jams for real," but he's "been too busy creating and promoting 'Bowie' to deliver an album by Bowie" (*The Good Times*). These are complaints about perceived authenticity, not artistry—about audience expectation, not the eccentricity of Bowie's performance.

20 Andrew Loog Oldham's more civil critique perhaps gets closer to the heart of responses to Bowie's shifting style. "It's very funny," he writes, "David Bowie may be the pet of the avant-garde crowd, but his past few records have been pure, undiluted pop" (qtd. in Tiven). Oldham's summation here is at least as much about identity as it is about genre. The notably flamboyant producer and former manager of The Rolling Stones expresses rather succinctly what was gradually emerging as a unified sense of betrayal among Bowie's biggest supporters. People liked Ziggy Stardust as an ally to weirdoes. Though he retained the capacity to shock them, they felt as though they understood him and he understood them. And again here, Brandon Taylor offers insight into how this state of affairs may have come to pass: "In our current aesthetic framework," he argues, "queerness is a charged state—it has the effect of reconfiguring the context of everything it touches such that those objects become activated with meaning" ("Who Cares?"). As difficult as it may have been for those, like Shaw and Oldham, who believed themselves to have their own weird fingers on the beating pulse of rock and roll, to accept that David Bowie was not what they thought he was—that they did not, in fact, know what he was—it must have been all the more difficult for the fans who cathected upon him as a symbol of their own queer ontologies or progressive politics. This was, after all, not three years after Stonewall in the U.S. and just six after the decriminalization of homosexuality in England. These fans needed Bowie to be Ziggy, not some shape-shifting opportunist.

21 On the other hand, the consensus on Bowie's post-Ziggy work exposes something that, like Bowie stripped of Ziggy, no one wants to look at—what Habermas calls "the kernel of intolerance" embedded within liberal tolerance, which cannibalizes itself by rigidly defending its own interests (34). Because it risks undermining humanistic and political goals, such as the pursuit of civil liberties and economic equality, it feels dangerous to traverse the tightrope-thin line between identity as a series of acts and identity as a single actor or between the subject as an effect and a producer of effects (Nealon 11). And thus, Bowie became what Barthes calls "the absolute object," that which is "withdrawn by its very extravagance," its preciousness, from the world of human purpose and "human use" (85). His frozen, impeccably styled image could be called up like a talisman to conjure certain ideas about queer experience, but only so long as it remained frozen, insistent by nature of being consistent.

22 Even before coming out publicly and in print first as gay, then as bisexual, and long before finally settling somewhere just barely beyond the binary, David Bowie's particular style of glam had been called "gay rock," both by those who wished to ridicule him and by those laying claim to him as an advocate and an ally. He had worn gowns on his album covers, offered makeup tips in *Creem* magazine, and finally, in 1972, he told the world: "I'm gay, and I always have been, even when I was David Jones" (*Melody Maker*). Then, he took it back and was called a cultural tourist, his performances labeled camp (Reynolds 105). The unyielding enigma of Bowie's sexuality garners strong reactions from the queer community still today. Take, for instance, a debate from a think piece published in *Queerty*, a popular LGBTQ entertainment blog, in October 2016, mere months after Bowie's death, in which fans square off on the subject:

> David Bowie's subcultural appropriation...played well and was edgy and then when it no longer suited him he dropped it. ... Bowie appears to have been, at most, questioning or experimental at one point in his life, which is a natural part of self-discovery and in and of itself is fine, however should we really be honoring him as an LGBTQ icon when he himself seems to have run from the gay and bi label so adamantly for most of his adult life?
>
> While it may be tempting to claim as our own cultural and artistic heroes such as Bowie, especially the year following his death...it comes with a cost. It seems to invalidate someone like David Bowie's true identity and calls into question why we aren't honoring individuals who proudly identified as a member of the LGBTQ community. (Taylor)

23 Jeff Taylor, the author of this piece, gets some pushback in the comments, the strongest of which comes from a community member called Sailor_Galaviz, who replies, "[G]uess what, Jeff? You don't get to determine someone's sexuality or their place in the LGBT pantheon posthumously. ... There was absolutely zero need for tear[ing] down someone who gave so much hope to our community during a time when we needed a savior like him" (*Queerty*). In this exchange, we can see how both criticism for and defense of Bowie as queer hero are constructed upon the same foundations: a demand, first and foremost, for knowability—Can we rightly "claim" him as "our own?" Where does he fit in the "LGBT pantheon?"—and, second, for ideological purity—that he possesses a "true identity," that he operates as the community's "savior." As Usher and Fremaux point out, "the narrative of Bowie's career is long established, both by long-term fans, who want to relive the Bowie of their past, and by the mainstream media, who are happy to indulge them" by rehashing contention about his status as a queer icon (395). It would seem that a Bowie laid bare, or a Bowie while he is ch-ch-changing, cannot be looked at fairly if at all—we turn away in disgust, or out of decency, and we rush to put his tightest, shiniest playsuit back on, even though he hasn't been that Bowie for quite some time.

24 Ambivalence surrounding Bowie's queer canonization, like rock journalists' ambivalence toward his perpetually new sound and style, arises, once again, from expectation. In this case, some of that expectation has been set by what Brian McNair calls "striptease culture," defined as a trend toward the "art of sexual transgression, and in particular the sexualized art of the body," in which bodily exposure is taken as a pure and powerful representation of "the artist him or herself" (*Striptease Culture* 13). Striptease culture conflates the naked with the nude. It is for this reason that I find it useful to consider *PinUps*, and not *Aladdin Sane*, as Bowie's first major transitional album, and to reconsider the "cover" according to a Barthesian schematic. For Barthes, striptease eroticizes paradox, not the body. It operates according to a logic of "contradiction." He defines the

striptease as "a spectacle based on fear, or rather on the pretense of fear, as if eroticism... went no further than a sort of delicious terror" (84). The removal of clothing to expose the skin beneath is scary not only because it threatens to expose the viewer in desire more than the subject viewed; it portends the demystification, and thus the spoiling, of whatever is under there.

25 With *PinUps*, we encounter Bowie ready to be liberated from the tired uniform that Ziggy Stardust had become but not yet ready to be seen without him, covering himself in covers to keep the spectacle going. Shedding "the classic props" of one's habitual performance, however, is not the same as granting access to the bare life underneath. In plainer words, removing clothing does not necessarily make a body naked, and even when it sometimes does, the quality of nakedness does not make a body a self. Believing things to be otherwise, I suspect, grounds some of the disappointment surrounding the release of *Aladdin Sane*, with its new character who revealed nothing but his determination to remain in flux—not quite Ziggy, not quite elsewise. These divestitures serve as another covering layer of performance, rendering the "unveiled body" still "more remote." Barthes reminds us that the "well-known rite" of "furs... fans... gloves... feathers... fishnet stockings, in short the whole spectrum of adornment," gives "the living body" over "to the category of luxurious objects...magical décor ;" it does not simply dress it. "Covered with feathers or gloved," he argues, "[a] woman identifies herself...as a stereotyped element of music-hall," a shiny object among shiny objects, and so "to shed objects as ritualistic as these is no longer a part of a further, genuine undressing." The act, instead, reminds the viewer that the body exposed is not *for* him—in fact, continues to evade him. By temporarily choosing to become "the irrefutable symbol of the absolute object, that which serves no purpose," Barthes' public private dancer thus cannot be subjugated to anyone's purpose but her own. She may dance, but she cannot be made to tap dance for the man. (85)

26 To the viewer, the contradictory facts of objectivity and inaccessibility are tantalizing and antagonizing because it is he who is stripped of agency, much to his surprise. The rules of striptease render the viewer immobile, nonagential. While the stripper is free to prance and undulate about, both stripper and "strippee," the viewer should remain still, innocuous if not appreciative. Rather than enhance the erotic, according to Barthes—who might, himself, reveal too much here—the dancer's movements highlight the relative limitations of the viewer's role as part of a captive audience to whatever show might be on offer. In the case of *PinUps*, the show was one the audience had seen before, but the prettiest star seemed absent from it. If you look hard enough to find him there, you might come up with a theory about how each cover is thematically organized around the negotiation and negation of past and possible subject positions. Or, you might reflect on Twiggy's gender-bending presence on the famous album cover—her head on Bowie's shoulder like a Siamese twin, each of their faces made up to look, at once, like masks of themselves and each other.

PinUps Album Cover Art

Photographer: Justin de Villeneuve (Nigel Davies)
Models: Twiggy/Lesley Lawson (left), David Bowie (right)
Makeup: Pierre LaRoche
Graphics: Ray Campbell
Details: 1973, Los Angeles, CA

27 While Twiggy-Bowie appears bored, regarding the camera directly, Bowie-Twiggy looks terrified, looking right through it and straight ahead. Indeed, the track from *Aladdin Sane* that got Twiggy's attention and prompted this photo shoot is rife with images expressing anxiety regarding uncertainty: "Twig the wonder kid" is "not sure she likes" her lover or not, so "she turn[s] her face away ;" it's "hard" to "keep formation with all this fall out saturation" ("Drive-in Saturday"). In the end, however, what you will decidedly not turn up in such an investigation of this album is any semblance of Ziggy Stardust.

28 Many fans of Bowie in the seventies probably felt like hapless voyeurs to something they were not sure they wanted to see. (Turns out, they did.) They had committed themselves to the spectacle of Ziggy Stardust with the sort of fidelity that often accompanies desiring identification and found themselves unable to leave before the end, helpless to intervene except by lodging impotent complaints in niche publications. But for the LGBTQ community, these feelings carried political significance. Whether or not Ziggy really *was* Bowie and Bowie Ziggy underneath it all was a more important question than whether or not they liked saxophone solos and wanted to hear more of them. Taylor describes what he calls "a failure to understand the fundamental nature of the problem" that continues to preoccupy queer representation and trouble the narratives of queer lives that applies here. He argues, "Queer people live their everyday lives under the threat of violence and political persecution," so "our narratives must remain alive and vital to that pain." At the same time, he goes on, we must not rely on a "queer aesthetic" that privileges stories

recognizable as authentic to a heteronormative gaze. To do so is to continue to empower the "overculture" to pass judgment over, limit, and chastise queer performance. Taylor's call for a queer aesthetic that "weep[s]...laugh[s]...withdraw[s]...and advance[s]" is not unlike Barthes' notions about the importance of mobility in striptease, wherein the performer wrests all the power over her performance from the audience, commanding the viewer to watch and, perchance, to learn. ("Who Cares?")

29 Barthes ends his essay on striptease by considering its finale. "The end of the striptease," he writes, "is...no longer to drag into the light a hidden depth, but to signify, through the shedding of an incongruous and artificial clothing, nakedness as a natural vesture...which amounts in the end to regaining a perfectly chaste state of the flesh" and relief (84-85). For a while, it seemed like Bowie's death, and only his death, would mark such an end, with beatific celebrations of his life and work cropping up all over the world, in every community. But the ghost of Ziggy Stardust haunts the critical archive—a reminder of our rigid commitments, past and present, to fictions more damaging than a rock star's personality crisis, fictions of stability within our identity positions that do not serve us or our communities well. We cling to them because they afford us comfortable, provisional unities and provisional advances in human rights and social justice, but when we are unable to let go of them or depart from them, they become narrative loops. They help construct the epistemology of the closet. This is not, however, cause for despair. As William Rasch reminds us, "The world of the political *is* dirty, messy, sticky, and smelly" in spite of our desire to bring about "the world at play, the world of the study, the world whose obligations are not worldly" (17). "[O]ne can have that world," he concedes, but, "one can only realize it willfully" (17). It seems to me that one of David Bowie's most significant cultural contributions may lie in his otherworldly ability to reject limiting narratives and to trouble the assumption that for an identity position to be authentic or politically viable, it must be familiar, clear, or stable.

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NOTES

1. See Oliver James, Chapter 6, for a particularly wild example combining Bowie biography with self-help that develops Bowie's characters as "consoling" personae for David Jones.

2. See Graves-Brown and Orange for more on Bowie's apotheosis in memoriam.

3. As Judith Butler sometimes collapses distinctions between sex and gender, not to suggest a terminological equivalency, but to highlight the social nature of a body's composure and comportment, I use the word "performance" in its traditional sense, to refer to stage and screen performances such as Dyer's work addresses, and in the Butlerian sense, describing performativity with respect to the construction of identity and gender subversion, in which a subject "signifies" via a "regulated process of repetition" (*Gender Trouble* 145). Butler herself is careful to keep these terms distinct as she theorizes performativity in *Gender Trouble* , but imbricating the two once more is, I think, useful when discussing celebrity lives because, as Butler points out in *Bodies That Matter*, these performances are discursively regulated, and fame thwarts or forecloses certain performative possibilities as well as inspires the performative acts of others (8).

4. Others, notably Richard Dyer, Judith Mayne, and Chad Bennett, have documented the significant "identity-making force" of fandom and queer spectatorship as habits of consumption grounded in communal, "affirmative explorations of queer performativity" ("Flaming the Fans" 19); see also: Dyer's *Heavenly Bodies* and Mayne's *Cinema and Spectatorship*.

5. The fan, called "Julie," recounts: "I was at the Hammersmith Odeon when Bowie killed off Ziggy in '73. ...A lot of men were throwing their underwear and showing their cocks all over the place. ...I remember that around me nobody gave a shit really about doing these things because it was rumoured that maybe this was the last time Bowie would perform. Maybe this was the last time Ziggy would be here." (Vermorel 182)

6. My argument echoes Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's in her seminal work, *The Epistemology of the Closet* , where she denies "any standpoint of thought from which the rival claims of...minoritizing and universalizing understandings of sexual definition could be decisively arbitrated as to their 'truth.'" "Instead," she argues, "the performative effects of the self-contradictory discursive field of force created by their overlap" and "that these impactions of homo/heterosexual definition took place in a setting, not of spacious emotional or analytic impartiality, but rather of urgent

homophobic pressure to devalue one of the two nominally symmetrical forms of choice" have constructed our identitarian claims surrounding sexuality and sexual orientation. (9)

7. For more on ontological security seeking, see Giddens.

8. William Connolly advocates "a fugitive philosophy of transcendence" with respect to the way "the ontology one adopts filters into" his or her politics and vise versa—a philosophy which "defines ethical life in terms of a plastic set of intrinsic purposes to be pursued rather than a set of universal laws to be obeyed" (*A Leftist Ontology* ix-x).

9. See also: pop singer Boy George's memory of seeing Bowie in concert for the first time for an account of how Bowie inspired the musicians/cultural icons whose careers followed his (*Take It Like a Man* 585).

10. See Nicholas Pegg for an encyclopedic view of Bowie's career, which includes several references to schizophrenia, mostly figurative, and personality crisis.

ABSTRACTS

This essay examines the reception history of David Bowie's 1970s albums, studying popular resistance to his self-reinvention. Using *PinUps* and the trope of the "cover" as an anchoring point, I read Bowie's evolution during this period according to the logic of striptease as theorized by Roland Barthes, whose *Mythologies* reached star status and underwent translation in the '70s as well. Barthes defines the striptease as a spectacle grounded in contradiction, evoking the pretense of fear. I likewise argue that the process of shedding the Ziggy Stardust avatar carried with it the threat of contradicting or negating the powerful image of queer experience that Ziggy conveyed to mainstream audiences.

Cet essai examine l'évolution de l'accueil par le public des albums des années 1970 de David Bowie, étudiant la résistance populaire à son auto-réinvention. En utilisant *PinUps* et la figure de style de la pochette comme point de connexion, j'ai lu l'évolution de Bowie pendant cette période selon la logique du strip-tease théorisée par Roland Barthes, dont les *Mythologies* sont devenues populaires et ont également été traduites en anglais dans les années 70. Barthes définit le strip-tease comme un spectacle fondé en contradiction, évoquant le prétexte de la peur. Je soutiens également que le processus consistant à renverser l'avatar de Ziggy Stardust comportait la menace de défaire l'image puissante de l'expérience queer que Ziggy a transmise au grand public.

INDEX

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